Mentoring Identified as One of the Evidence-Based Strategies for "Addressing the Unmet Educational Needs of Children and Youth in the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems"

It has become well-known that a strong relationship exists between educational attainment and adult outcomes; for example, an individual with a bachelor's degree earns nearly $1 million more in his or her lifetime than someone with a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). In this report, Leone and Weinberg point out that education services for youth in foster care and the juvenile justice system are often inadequate in addressing their complex academic and social needs, resulting in a fewer number of these students graduating from high school and enrolling in post-secondary education. In terms of foster care, confronting this issue is critical for three reasons:

1) Certain ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented in foster care, e.g., 19.3 Black children, 16.5 American Indian and Alaskan Native children, and 16.1 Pacific Islander children per 1,000 are in foster care compared to 10.8 White children (National Indian Child Welfare Association, 2007).
2) Children and youth who have been abused or neglected "crossover" into the delinquency system earlier and penetrate more deeply than other delinquent youth (Herz, 2010).
3) We have an "obligation" to these youth because "a court has removed them from their parents' care to keep them safe and provide for their overall well-being, which includes ensuring that they succeed educationally" (Leone and Weinberg, 2010, p.7).

Leone and Weinberg discuss characteristics of youth in the foster care system, citing research that shows young children – five years and under – experience significant developmental delays and problems (p.9). They also note that school-age foster children consistently achieve at a lower rate than their peers and receive special education services at a higher one – between 25 and 52 percent of the populations studied; foster care youth are also more likely to drop out or fail to complete a high school level of education and less likely to take college preparatory classes, even when compared to peers with similar grades and standardized test scores (pp.10-12). Additionally, youth in foster care tend to come from high poverty communities, so well-intentioned laws like the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, which prioritizes keeping children in familiar surroundings, may actually be detrimental to students whose needs exceed the capacity of their inadequately resourced schools (p.13).

The barriers to improving educational performance identified by Leone and Weinberg include the high mobility of youth in foster care, the lack of coordination and collaboration between agencies, and the over- and under-identification of these youth into special education (p.15-21). Leone and Weinberg assert that "[a]lthough legislation and litigation have helped define and reduce some of the[se] systemic barriers…there still is a tremendous need for interventions that target the individual educational needs of these children and youth and their readiness to learn…[and] show evidence of changing the trajectory for these youth" (p.33). Among the evidence-based interventions that Leone and Weinberg describe, a well-supported, long-lasting mentor-mentee relationship stands out as one of the most effective strategies for reducing negative behaviors and improving academic achievement for the most disadvantaged or at risk youth (p.38). Furthermore, the implementation of mentoring programs may offer the education, child welfare, and judicial systems a valuable opportunity to work together in identifying the youth who would most benefit from mentoring and supporting best practices (p.39).

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